LOUIS CHARLES DAMAIS

Harry J. Benda

We had driven down to Glodok for a quick Chinese supper before Louis Damais, his wife and daughters took me back to Kemajoran Airport, where they had awaited me ten days before. That was on June 16, 1965, and I did not guess that it was to be our last meeting. Louis had already consented to attend the 27th International Congress of Orientalists in Ann Arbor, 1967, and I had vaguely started to make plans for one of our infrequent reunions--we had met in Rochester, in London, and at long last again in Djakarta. Then suddenly two cables from Djakarta told me that Louis had died of a heart attack on May 23, 1966. I have still not adjusted to his death, for, though we had come to live far apart since 1946, he had in so many ways been part of my life for more than a quarter of a century. Without him, I would never have become a student of Indonesian history. More than that, I would have been a poorer, far poorer man. And poor I feel now that he is gone.

Our first meeting was quite accidental. I had heard him give a brilliant, light-hearted *causerie* at Batavia's Alliance Française--one of his very rare public appearances--and rashly decided to ask him to give me French lessons a few days later. He (quite understandably) received my request with barely concealed hostility, then, a few moments later, reversed himself and told me to come to his home with Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal. At that time, I'd been in Indonesia just a few months, a bewildered, 19-year old orang baru straight from Czechoslovakia. Louis Damais, only a few years my senior, was already an accomplished scholar connected with the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient, who during the war was to be temporarily attached to the Archaeological Service (Oudheidkundige Dienst) of the colonial government, working with Dr. Stutterheim. A brilliant linguist, he was in the process of compiling a French-Javanese dictionary in addition to his archeological and philological researches--all matters far beyond my horizon in 1939.

I never quite knew why he decided to offer me his hospitality and friendship, for I had nothing to offer him but my total ignorance of things Oriental, my carefully nurtured Central European bourgeois parochialism with all its ingrained prejudices, but also--and perhaps this is what he realized from the very outset--innocence coupled with willingness to learn new things. With patience and good humor, indeed with at times roguish impishness, he set about to open my eyes to the Indonesia and the Indonesians around me. Living and working

in the European colonial business community, I was as happily oblivious of them as were most totok, and, indeed, all my fellow-refugees from Europe who had found their way to the Indies in the 1930's. In any case, what had started out as an introduction to the intricacies of French poetry soon developed into a long, exploratory journey into aspects of Indonesian life, combined with a great number of other things. (I must ruefully confess that my French remained as vestigial as it had been before. We invariably conversed in Dutch, which I had slowly started to master and which he spoke quite fluently, with a marvellous touch of Gallic inflection and accent. It remained our *lingua franca* until the very end.)

After only a few months, the pattern of my life became as untypical for a young European businessman in colonial Indonesia as it came to appear quite normal to me. Working hours were spent in a Dutch importing house. This was the world of shipping documents, letters of credit, and foreign exchange regulations (which the war brought in its wake), the world of Chinese *tauke* and Dutch hotel managers, and indeed also that of the Saturday *rijsttafel* preceded by the obligatory *borrel* at the Hotel des Indes. The day over, afternoon tea and the shower marked the watershed between two worlds. Evenings and week-ends were spent with Louis, his Javanese wife, and the large circle of their acquaintances and friends, many of them Indonesian students and intellectuals, a few also younger Dutch civil servants. Movies, parties, long evenings of music making (Damais was a first-rate violinist, also played the piano with great flair, and, more remarkably still, was completely at home in the Javanese gamelan), trips--including a wonderful ten days the three of us spent in Bali in 1941--and, above all, talking, talking, talking--and slowly, on my part, reading. Schizophrenic, yes--but what an education!

On the lighter side of things, that education included such things as my initiation into Eastern cuisine and eating habits. With a straight face, my mentor on one occasion in the first weeks of our acquaintance offered me a red chilli, encouraging me to take a good bite into this "Javanese apple." On another, he royally ordered the waiter in a Chinese restaurant to remove fork and spoon from my table setting, thus forcing me to eat with chopsticks. (Both incidents were of course witnessed by highly appreciative audiences and continued to be recited "down the ages.") And on the serious side, I was gently led to see colonial Indonesia for what it really was. Without Louis, I would hardly have come to realize what it meant for educated Indonesians--they continued to be just *inlanders* in the circles of my daytime environment until the very end of Dutch rule--to live in the psychological and material straitjacket of foreign overlordship. Without him, I would not have felt the need to learn Bahasa Indonesia, and even to try my hand at gamelan (though my knees have never

forgiven him the tortures involved).

But more than all that, it was Louis Damais' personality that stamped itself on my young mind. For quite unlike my sheltered childhood and adolescence, Louis had come from a very poor family, hostile to his intellectual ambitions. Ironically, this fantastically brilliant man had never received a *baccalauréat*, just as he was never to be awarded a doctorate, though in the postwar years he was finally named professor at the Ecole Française. Yet he had broken several records in passing examinations in six oriental languages at the Ecole Pratique des Langues Orientales (readers of his monographs must be aware of his mastery, not only of Indonesian languages, but also of Arabic, Persian, and Chinese). Louis' linguistic curiosity had, so he once told me, first been aroused when in his early teens he purchased, for a few *sous*, a Hebrew Bible on the Left Bank; he then scraped together a few more coins to buy a dictionary, so that he could translate the Old Testament into French--all this secretly, lest his father catch him wasting his time on books!

When we met, he had a reading knowledge of some thirty languages, including Russian, Turkish, Hungarian, and Irish. Indeed, when at one time he came by a financial windfall, he immediately acquired Linguaphone records for modern Hebrew, Finnish, and a few other choice tongues not yet included in his repertoire. He also invested part of the money in a new short-wave radio, and spent countless hours following news broadcasts from all over the world, charting them carefully on a master sheet. This, to me, was the real Louis Damais: an endless curiosity, coupled with an incredible ability to concentrate on whatever he was doing--and yet, in-between, a willingness to spend relaxed hours with people, to make music, dance (I'll never cease envying the way he could tango!), quarrel, and just fool around, delighting in verbal jokes above all.

Then there was what might be called my political education, gradually imparted over the years. Louis' anticolonialism, always directed at the system, not at individuals, was only part of it, and in the Indonesian setting I found it relatively easy to make it my own in spite of the fact that to all intents and purposes I was the beneficiary, not the victim, of the "White Man's Burden" in the Indies (financially far better off than Louis, the scholar, let alone most of our friends). It proved far more difficult to dent my condescending anti-Arabism, derived from a long association with Zionism in Central Europe. Louis was, as I came to feel on many, many occasions, highly sensitive to the Jews' plight in Nazi-dominated Europe; but he had, after years of soldiering in Syria, come to admire the Arabs, and in the Palestinian issue could only see the tragedy of both Jews and Arabs, not that of the Jews alone. Learning

to respect the Arabs was just a little less difficult than to sympathize with Slovak grievances against the dominant Czechs--again, living in Bohemia, I had been conditioned to look down on the Slovak minority.

Then came the disaster of World War II. I shall never forget the dreadful day in the spring of 1940, when Batavia's Europeans--aroused from their colonial-neutral lethargy to patriotic fervor by Hitler's conquest of Holland--paraded in front of the French Consulate-General in honor of beleaguered France. The aged Consul-General, M. Delage, together with other French officials (Louis among them; he had been temporarily drafted and was acting vice-consul, I think) saluted the marchers--just a few hours before, as only they knew, France had surrendered to Germany. Louis Damais did not declare himself for De Gaulle, as virtually the entire small French resident community did. I was quite shocked, but when I finally mustered enough courage to ask him why, he flared up and told me that to be a "Free Frenchman" was meaningless unless one volunteered to fight. Since he was unwilling to enlist--as were the other Frenchmen in the Indies--he would, so he said, feel ashamed to wave the flag just for the political convenience of the hour. Of course he was not pro-Vichy either, let alone pro-German or for that matter pro-Japan.

In the fall of 1943 I was arrested and subsequently interned by the Japanese. It was Louis who every now and then managed to send me reassuring messages concerning the course of the war to various internment camps, which he distilled from BBC broadcasts he was listening to nightly (at grave risk, for the Kempeitai was prowling all the time to catch short-wave listeners). He even managed to send me a few guilders from time to time, and, at war's end, offered me the hospitality of his home. For a few hectic weeks thereafter, we actually worked together quite feverishly, attempting to bring Indonesian Nationalists and liberal Dutchmen together on the "neutral" ground of his house in Djalan Gresik. Given the poisoned atmosphere of post-surrender Djakarta, our efforts bore little fruit. Shortly thereafter, I left Indonesia for good.

It was only after I left Indonesia that I went back to school in New Zealand, and even then it took several years before I finally could put the little I had learned under Louis' tutelage to use when I entered graduate school at Cornell University. My choice to write a dissertation on the Japanese occupation of Java was, it goes without saying, directly inspired by Louis Damais, who had in fact collected a huge amount of occupation-time materials in the hope that I might one day be able to use them; and I did, much to his delight. His measured praise for my accomplishments were and remain my most treasured possessions. Although separated, Louis never ceased to be my distant mentor, in writing or when we met. We would sit in a small London cafe

or, most recently, on the verandah of his tiny home in Djakarta, and he would try to tell me what he was working on and comment on my most recent piece of writing, approvingly, critically, questioningly.

Undoubtedly the years since 1945 had taken a pretty heavy toll. Even his professorship meant that he had to commute between Paris and Djakarta every other semester, and a few years back he fell seriously ill in France and had to be hospitalized for several weeks. I believe that he never quite recovered his working capacity, though he would go on driving himself relentlessly and quite indignantly refused to make concessions to his weakened state. Always he was more concerned about others than himself, and, as a good many Americans know, his door remained wide open to all comers with a serious interest in matters Indonesian, however busy his own schedule. A few hours *chez* Damais--are there many recent students of Indonesia who have not profited from them?

But though he continued to be generous to the end, he was quite visibly depressed by Indonesian political developments from the late 1950's on. Always a staunch advocate of Indonesian nationalism, the increasing radicalization of the political scene, no less than the country's economic deterioration, made him somber and pessimistic. The Louis I met in 1965 was an older, sadder and of course (as I should have understood), also a sick man. Gone, but for the occasional moment, was the banter of our earlier reunions. He seemed to suffer almost physical discomfort at the sight of Djakarta's political wall posters (so reminiscent, in many ways, of the crude anti-imperialist pictorial propaganda of the Japanese era). He winced as we watched uniformed Gerwani women go through "political calisthenics" on TV in Bandung. Only when we visited Barabudur and Prambanan--guru and pupil once again--did he fully come to life.

Of his scientific accomplishments I have said little. Others, far better qualified, will, I know, have their say in these matters. But few, if any, can have known <u>my</u> Louis. *Voilà un homme.*

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